

ARJUNAL APPEAL
ON PAGE 46

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Pentagon

By Wire, by Phone, A Watch on the World

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WASHINGTON, May 11 — The calm of the National Military Command Center, a hushed, dimly lit cavern the size of a small high school gymnasium deep inside the Pentagon, was broken by the telephone call from the Pacific Command in Hawaii.

About 35 minutes earlier, a pilot flying a Marine helicopter from Iwakuni, Japan, to the Japanese island of Okinawa had radioed to his base that an accompanying helicopter had just dropped into the sea. The pilot gave his position and said he had begun a search.

The base relayed that message to the Pacific headquarters in Hawaii, which then phoned the command center here, where a 24-hour, 7-day watch on the world is maintained to give the President, the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff their first warning of any event that might affect the nation's military security.

Watch teams in the center scrutinize events as they happen, from accidents like the helicopter crash to the terrorist bombing of the Marine headquarters in Beirut or the slaying of an American Army major by a Soviet sentry in East Germany. In the extreme, the command center would be the first in Washington to see a threat of nuclear war.

"This is a lot like standing watch aboard ship," said Commodore Francis R. Donovan, a naval officer who leads a watch team of 24 men and women from the four military services and intelligence agencies. "This job is almost entirely operational," he said.

In the case of the helicopter, the phone call from the Pacific Command was followed several minutes later by a written operational report giving more details. Meantime, the duty officer asked an assistant to pull from a computerized data bank the names, locations and speed of American warships close by and to calculate the time it would take a vessel to reach the scene.

In Machines' Muted Chatter

Then a report was distributed to senior officials in the Pentagon, State Department and White House. Situation reports from the Pacific continued by telephone, in the muted chatter of teleprinters or on television monitors until, many hours later, came the news that all 17 marines aboard the helicopter had been lost.

There was one last detail to tidy up: A member of the watch team noticed that a news agency, whose tickers add to the flow of information into the center, had reported 16 marines lost. He called a press officer to suggest that the error be corrected.

The key officers in the command center are the five watch team leaders, such as Commodore Donovan, who take turns being in charge. Fresh from operational duty aboard ship or with air wings or troops in the field, they make the initial judgments in a potential crisis.

The information they get comes from the communications apparatus of the World-Wide Military Command and Control System, from the Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency. It also comes from satellites through the Joint Reconnaissance Center, from sensors of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, from the hot line to Moscow and The Associated Press and United Press International.

The team leaders, all one-star officers, decide when events have become serious enough to alert the Director of Operations on the Joint Staff and to split off an action team to help senior officers handle the crisis.

Commodore Donovan is a tall, lean old salt from Arlington, Mass., who enlisted in the Navy in 1952, won an appointment to the Naval Academy and has spent much of his career in destroyers and amphibious assault ships. He has commanded five ships, the latest being the amphibious assault ship Belleau Wood that took part in operations off Lebanon in 1983.

His watch is an eight-hour day for six days, then two days on alert where he must be within easy reach of the Pentagon. After that, he has two days

off. If his last shift was from 6 A.M. to 2 P.M., the next is 2 P.M. to 10 P.M.

When he has the early watch, Commodore Donovan supervises preparations for a daily briefing at 8:30 A.M. of Gen. John W. Vessey Jr., the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and senior officers on the Joint Staff.

Because his schedule is set for his year on duty here, for once in his career Commodore Donovan and his wife, the former Martha Dwyer Lyons, can plan their family and social lives. "There's no homework," the commodore said. "When you get home, you know you're not going to get a call. There's no main feed pump to worry about here."

Because of the rotation, Commodore Donovan cannot take leave during that year. To get time off to attend a daughter's graduation from Holy Cross, the commodore swapped with another team leader. But that is the only time he will switch, he said. "There's a reluctance to do that," the commodore said, "because I like to work with my own team."

In his tour so far, Commodore Donovan has not had a crisis like the terrorist attack that killed 241 Americans in Beirut in 1983. He reached over to tap on a wooden desk. "The quieter we are in here," he said, "the more people are alive out there."